DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 552 CG 012 614

AUTHOR Girard, Kathryn L.
TITLE Feminists' Perceptions of Women's Schooling Needs.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Ontario, CANADA, March, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Needs; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; *Individual Development; Questionnaires; Research Projects; *Self Concept; Social Values; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

This paper presents some of the findings of a survey of feminists seeking to answer three basic questions about women's education. The questions guiding the research were: (1) What do feminist women perceive as important aspects of an education for women which promotes the development of their potentials? (2) What aspects of their schooling experiences do feminists perceive as having been mostly positive for them as women? and (3) What aspects of their schooling experience do feminists perceive as having been mostly negative for them as women? The responses, which point to an educational program designed to make women strong, independent, confident and competent, have many implications for Women's Studies programs and women's centers. One is that content changes are not enough; Women's Studies programs must help instructors learn and implement new ways of teaching in order to support new individual and group behavior patterns. Another implication is that a sex-fair college curriculum will not meet women's needs. Besides just adding women to the texts and courses, the institution must enable women to build the confidence necessary to respond to that content in meaningful ways. (Author/BP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED155552

FEMINISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S SCHOOLING NEEDS

Dr. Kathryn Lee Girard

Women's Educational Equity Project and
School of Education
Draper Hall
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

K.L. Girard

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Toronto, Canada
March, 1978

CG 012614

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

SESSION: 3.15

This paper presents some of the findings of a survey of feminists seeking to answer three basic questions about women's education. The questions guiding the research were: 1) What do feminist women perceive as important aspects of an education for women which promotes the development of their potentials; 2) What aspects of their schooling experiences do feminists perceive as having been mostly positive for them as women; 3) What aspects of their schooling experience do feminists perceive as having been mostly negative for them as women?[1]

Feminists were the selected respondent group for several reasons. Women who identify themselves as feminists have looked beyond societally imposed restrictions on women. They are a group who have assessed their own potentials as persons and understood, on a deeply personal level, the effects of sex prejudice on women. Feminists represent a group of women who have become aware of and active against the oppression of women. They are, by definition, advocates of women's interests, needs and rights. It is primarily because feminists' view of women's potentials goes beyond limited and stereotyped roles that they constitute the sample group. It would seem inappropriate to ask a group of women who accept severely restricted goals, aspirations and activities as right for their sex and whose emotional or economic survival my be dependent on that acceptance, to examine past experiences as women and to project what would be good for women in the future. Feminists are the only identifiable group not biased in that limiting, negative way. For the purpose of the study a feminist is defined as an individual actively involved in working toward change in the political, economic, religious and social status or organization of women based on an understanding of women's collective problems in this society.

---

[1] Findings are reported in depth in Girard's, "How Schools Fail Women: A Study of Feminists' Perceptions of Their Schooling Experiences and Women's Schooling Needs," Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1974.

OBTAINING A FEMINIST SAMPLE

The sample was sought through members of local feminist organizations who were asked to identify feminist friends or contacts residing outside the State of Massachusetts, where the study was based and where the pilot had been conducted. One hundred and nineteen individuals were identified through this process. Eighty-one additional contacts were gathered from the mailing lists of several local groups. Two hundred questionnaires were sent out. Approximately 90% went to individuals. The remaining 10% were sent to action groups, women's centers and feminist publications with a letter requesting that an individual complete the questionnaire.

The final questionnaire had two parts. The first contained sixty items on past elementary, secondary and college schooling experiences and nine open-ended questions. The second provided sixty-nine possible elements of an improved educational program for women and one open-ended question.

In order to insure that respondents were feminists a series of five screening questions was developed. To be included in the study, a respondent had to: 1) have at least one friend who was a feminist (the assumption being that feminism is tied to growth with other women); 2) call herself a feminist (on the grounds that the label is not "scary" or negative to women who would meet the study's definition of feminism); 3) have a friend who participated in a Women's Movement activity (on the assumption that feminists are active and in contact with other active women); 4) herself participate in at least one activity;and 5) classify herself as actively involved (given the definition, sympathy with issues was not seen as sufficient). It was felt that these criteria would not exclude women on the basis of varying ideologies within the Women's Movement. One hundred and fifteen completed questionnaires were returned. Twelve did not meet the feminist criteria. Thus, one hundred and three useable responses form the basis of the findings.

The high response rate (60% when adjusted for wrong address returns) may be due in part to interest in the questions. Many respondents indicated that they had never been asked similar questions or hadn't looked back on their experiences in the way the questionnaire asked them to. They found it enjoyable and stimulating. The fact that a wide range of feminists helped to shape the questionnaire undoubtedly contributed to its being so personally engaging.

DEVELOPING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In developing the survey instrument fifteen women responded to a questionnaire asking, "What questions do you think would be important to ask concerning women's past educational experiences and suggested areas for change?" Writers on women's education were also reviewed to identify the topics they considered important. Another ten women participated by attempting to specify the meaning of the concept,"an education that makes women strong (not necessarily physically)." The first four steps of Hutchinson's model, "Operationalization of Fuzzy Concepts," was used to facilitate the process of specification.[2] All of these activities provided the base for generating survey items. Finally, sixteen local feminists participated in the piloting of the questionnaire. Their responses to the questionnaire also helped to create an instrument appropriate for feminists.

FINDINGS

In reporting those findings which relate to women's higher education no attempt will be made to explore the relationship to or implication for the education of men. While some of the needs, dissatisfactions and negative

---

[2] Thomas Hutchinson and Larry Benedict, "Operationalization of Fuzzy Concepts," University of Massachusetts, September 1970, (Xerox).

feelings expressed by respondents may have been shared by male students, such discussion is beyond the intent of this paper. Overall, an attempt will be made to highlight those conditions more likely to have primarily affected female students.

Curriculum

An unequal physical education program for men and women (62%, with another 21% indicating a total lack of a physical education program), the lack of encouragement to develop a strong and healthy body (62%), unequal opportunity for participation in extracurricular activities (60%) and the lack of interesting or exciting women in course content (86%) emerge from the item-analysis as curricular problems in higher education.

In the open-ended questions, curriculum related responses accounted for the majority of unmet needs. Confirming the item-analysis, the open-ended responses indicate the widely shared need for exposure to women thinkers in students' fields or, more generally, to Women's Studies.

Some unmet needs speak to problems that may or may not be sex specific. For example, women cite intellectual stimulation, practical skills and creative development as needs that their institutions failed to meet. These needs may have been met for men or they may have remained unmet for all students. However, other dissatisfactions and unmet needs related to teacher attitudes and behaviors--not being taken seriously, enforcement of the female role, etc.--do suggest that these needs may have been more acute for women in the face of no other source of support.

The curriculum was not often recalled as a source of support for women. Taking Women's Studies courses (an option open only to younger respondents), was the most frequently cited helpful element of the curriculum. Only two women cited skills they learned in college as having helped them to do what they

wanted as women. One woman noted that it was "flunking out" which was the greatest help. Table 1 indicates the breakdown of all anecdotal responses concerning curriculum.

Teacher Behavior and Attitudes

For slightly more than half of all respondents "instructors made it clear that women should be feminine and men should be masculine." The likely consequences of this seem to show up in the responses to questions of unmet needs and dissatisfactions. Sex discrimination, lack of encouragement or support, the lack of female role models, the enforcement of a limited female role and not having one's work taken seriously, all emerge as issues connected to instructor attitudes and behavior.

The item-analysis also revealed that almost three-fourths of the respondents agreed that instructors did not express or imply a preference for female students. Perceptions of whether this lack of preference was mainly positive or negative was mixed. But most seemed to know they were not favored.

Comments from respondents suggest the toll taken by not being treated on the basis of one's merit, let alone not being treated as an equal of male students or not being preferred. One women noted, "...I studied architecture--a male field. As an "A" student my instructors, all male, did not treat me as a male "A" student...instructors who would make a comment on my dress during a jury instead of my project," (048). Another woman described the effects as,

> "By the time I got to college, all my earlier ambition was gone. At the same time I was being offered challenging advanced material. I wanted to take advantage of this... but I was demoralized about my own abilities. Lacking encouragement from any of my teachers (I--we--were expected to perform as if nothing had been done all those years) I turned to the long-sought success in my social life for satisfaction, (091).

This woman goes on to describe herself in graduate school where an all male department refuses to take her work in women's history seriously despite her

talent and abilities. The themes of acceptance and being taken seriously as unattainable, frustrating goals, are woven throughout respondents' comments.

The largest single response to the question concerning what helped a woman to do what she wanted was, "one instructor who cared." For several women, then, it wasn't a repeated or reinforced message. One woman described very articulately the importance of one instructor's concern.

She recalled:

> A woman instructor who told me that I was beautiful and right-on--the first encouragement I received in a whole long time. She talked with me about what I was going through, gave me security in a mass of insecurity, functioned as a sounding board for my ideas and supported me to the hilt when it was necessary and all other times. She stepped out of her role as an instructor and extended her friendship to me--the most human act I ever saw an "instructor" make (068).

Too many women have perhaps missed or been denied that chance life-line.

Another woman (one of several) described the importance of love relationships and friendships with instructors. She had "...several love affairs with male teachers who responded to me intellectually as well as sexually. Without such intimacy I doubt I would have known they were impressed by my abilities," (041).

One final variation on this theme of instructor intervention may point to the effects of instructors' prejudices (in terms of accepting sex-role stereotypes) even when they weren't discriminating. One woman remembered:

> A professor who felt I was the most promising he had had in a decade invited me to join a graduate seminar, yet only brought up once the possibility of graduate school. I announced I was getting married and he let it go. How I wish that somewhere in my lower-middle class, "female" background, someone could have shown me that graduate school was for me. I can't blame the university--my narrow vision was established well before (066).

Table II summarizes the responses to open-ended questions which point to unmet needs, dissatisfactions and perceptions of what was helpful in terms of instructors' behaviors and attitudes.

Counseling

More than two-thirds of the respondents indicated, in response to a direct question, that they were not encouraged to consider careers traditionally dominated by men and that this had a negative impact on them. Strong feelings about career also show up in the open-ended responses. Career planning as an unmet need was the largest single response in any of the open-ended categories. The lack of help in recognizing career options was also cited as a source of dissatisfaction, along with an overall lack of counseling and direct discouragement of applying to top graduate programs or pursuing non-feminine careers. In the case of counseling, there were no balancing perceptions of helpful aspects of counseling at the post-secondary level.

Leadership

The experience of 73% of the respondents was that most leadership responsibilities were assumed by men. **61% also charge they were not helped to develop leadership abilities by their institutions.. Both situations were negative.**

At the college level there were no comments under dissatisfactions related to leadership and only one statement of an unmet need that can be linked to leadership. One woman, who had previously responded negatively to the set of leadership questions, indirectly identified a problem affecting leadership as she described: "Expressing my thoughts in a classroom dominated by males - how difficult that is and how few teachers realize that in judging a woman student," (024).

The fact that leadership does not emerge as either a major need, dissatisfaction or helpful aspect may be the result of several factors. First, perceptions of needs in leadership may be subsumed under more general issues related to teacher attitudes - such as sex discrimination - or under personal issues - such as lack of self-confidence, ambivalence about assertiveness and

concerns over aggressiveness. Second, it may be that leadership is less significant than other areas. Third, many women involved in the Women's Movement, having had negative experiences with male leadership and equating leadership with the male styles they've confronted, may not see "leadership" as a clearly positive goal toward which they would aspire.

Identity and Self-Concept

Responses to questionnaire items indicated that more than half (59%) of the respondents "knew women weren't supposed to be smarter than men." Understandably, such a perception had negative consequences. In turn, the question of who to admire and emulate posed a real dilemma. The sample split widely in terms of selecting other women or men. Each choice resulted in both positive and negative feelings.

The need for women role models is voiced in open-ended responses as are a variety of issues concerning the reconciling of various traits - intelligence, strength or independence - with being female. The contradictions between "who I am" and "who I should be" (role expectations) were very painful to experience and were often painful in their resolution as women searched for their identities.

One woman succinctly stated the problem encountered by many. She charged that the institution

> ...made no effort to deal with the gap between what was expected of me in college--i.e., to be immensely intelligent--and the fact that I was entering a world in which women were expected to marry men smarter than they, (069).

In trying to find a way to balance these opposing expectations several women reported feelings related to being an exception among women. One woman described, "My feeling of being a freak, an intellectually ambitious woman in a male world. By college, alas, I thought of myself as a secret male, an exception among women (for whom I felt chiefly contempt)..." (041).

Other related dissatisfactions arose from relationships with men, social pressures, not taking oneself seriously and limiting one's own achievements. Table III presents the open-ended responses categorized as aspects of identity and self-concept.

For those women who could hold on to their intelligence, assertiveness, independence or belief in themselves - that provided the resource that helped them. Some held on to their knowledge of their worth and literally fought it out. Others found a cover: "Being attractive, again let me get away with being smart," (011). For others, either the degree of blatant sex discrimination or an identification that put them outside the bounds of conventional acceptance (being a Lesbian or feminist for example) forced them to develop strengthening responses. However, for many women the major resource they had in becoming who and what they wanted as women were other women who supported them.

IMPORTANT COMPONENTS OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION

The content of an educational program designed to promote the development of women's potentials, as perceived by a majority of feminist respondents would include traditional subjects - with the sciences and math receiving more emphasis or being more accessible to women students - as well as many non-traditional subjects - carpentry, mechanics, self-defense, women's history, women's lives, sex bias, racism, sexism and capitalism, feminist ideology, gynocracies, research on sex differences, wicca, anger and feminist revolution. The curriculum projected here would also make explicit, and treat from a feminist perspective, content areas previously implicit or hidden in the traditional curriculum; namely, sex roles, the nuclear family and sexuality.

Some of the processes identified are traditional ones - reading, writing, discussing, researching - though they may be applied to somewhat different

content. But other processes suggested for inclusion in the curriculum reflect important values and demands of feminists. That is, women are depicted as cooperating and helping one another, working in small groups rather than independently, working with and learning from women of different ages, recognizing and praising the abilities of other women, listening to one another, working in the community, consciously practicing new roles and behaviors and expressing ideas and feelings. A close, mirroring relationship between content and process emerges as critical. Also, it should be noted that underlying the suggestions of such things as women cooperating and listening to others is more than a belief in the value of cooperation. Feminists see the importance of women cooperating with other women; of women listening to other women. The underlying needs and beliefs concern respecting one's sex.

In terms of teacher behaviors and attitudes, the content and processes suggested above mean that the instructor is responsible for creating a learning environment in which the content and processes speak to the importance of each woman, her heritage, her needs, her present strengths and her future. The instructor is responsible for making the content available as well as for modeling and developing different learning processes and interactions.

In direct statements concerning the instructor, the item most important to respondents was that the instructor be a feminist. Since this was perceived as much more important than the instructor being a woman, the mandate would seem to be for a particular point of view on women, their roles, their potentials and their oppression.

Counseling needs under a changed educational program for women would include: 1) women actively defining life goals; 2) counselors encouraging women to think about careers; 3) women having the opportunity to talk about alternatives in raising a family; and 4) women exploring alternatives to marriage. Somewhat

less important was having women from different professions come to talk about career planning. Other possible counseling components having to do with providing role models or other more external strategies were not seen as important. This suggests that women see their own active exploration of the issues individually and with other women as their most important resources.

The many unmet needs and dissatisfactions women had in terms of identity and self-concept development were addressed through their vision of a changed curriculum that places - through its content and processes - each woman at the center of the curriculum. Overall, warmth, strength (inner and physical), a pride in one's self, and a commitment and responsiveness to other women characterize feminists' perceptions of what would be desirable for all women to feel and share as women in an educational setting.

In reviewing what was selected (and what wasn't) as essential or important for an improved education for women, several criteria seem to emerge as the basis for the choices. First, content and processes must be related to women's needs. Second, they should create opportunities for increased sharing and communication. Third, they should allow for the translation of knowledge and understanding into action. Fourth, components were selected that contributed to the development of collaboration within a group or collaboration as a skill. Finally, equality with men (or superiority to them) did not seem to be a goal. Items suggesting equal treatment, equal opportunity and equal participation with boys were not selected as essential. Rather, respondents selected those items suggesting the development of a positive vision for women. Hence, equal treatment was not a guiding framework in describing changes in women's education.

IMPLICATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES AND WOMEN'S CENTERS

The responses pointing to desired elements of an educational program designed to make women strong, independent, confident and competent suggest

many implications for Women's Studies (W.S.) programs and women's centers. First, there are clear implications for the learning processes and interactions in classes. Some women faculty have written about the problems of teaching courses which focus on putting women back in the curriculum. They find personal identification, consciousness raising and contemporary understanding and analysis as occurrences to be wary of and to suppress. One faculty woman undoubtedly spoke for many when she wrote that when these things seemed on the verge of erupting she would "reassume the position of professor, pronounced master of the proceedings, dominant figure, leader, male-type authoritarian...I guess I fear the revolution will come into my classroom...".[3] The implications of the findings here are that content changes are not enough; that the revolution must come into the classroom. This means that W.S. programs bear a responsibility for providing the in-service education and the on-going support to enable their instructors to learn and implement new ways of teaching in order to support new individual and group behaviors and patterns.

This is very much related to the implication that a sex-fair college curriculum will not meet women's needs. As one of the respondents previously quoted suggested, we can't pretend that something hasn't been "done" to women in all those prior years of schooling. While the institutions bear a responsibility for responding to women's compensatory needs, Women's Studies programs and women's centers are likely places to model programs that take into account what women need in order to make use of their own and the institution's resources. This means not just opening the proverbial door of opportunity, but helping women to walk through it. In the curriculum it means not just adding women to the texts or a course, but enabling women to build the confidence and self-concept necessary to respond to that content in meaningful ways.

---

[3] Janet R. Fireman, "Reflections on Teaching Women's History: First Down and Goal To Go!" Journal of the West, Volume XII, Number 2, April, 1973.

Connected to this is an implication for student preparation in Women's Studies programs. Most students' educational experiences have been in traditional settings where they have not learned to take responsibility for their own learning, where the rational mind is prized, where personal experiences are irrelevant and where the place of women in the culture as well as in the disciplines is denigrated or ignored. How can we expect students to know what expectations, behaviors, or norms are appropriate in a W.S. course? The W.S. courses end up with the burden of all the expectations for individual development, for group identification, for intellectual stimulation and for connecting to one's own experiences. Women's Studies programs may need to consider not only how to help instructors change their teaching patterns, but also, how to help students learn to function productively in a new learning environment.

Expanding the content of programs to include non-traditional subjects and 'non-academic' learning processes carries serious implications for the survival of such programs. It's one thing to argue for support for simply adding women to an already accepted literature or history course, or even for adding a new course covering women's contributions in a particular field. It's quite another matter to provide a rationale acceptable to faculty groups for including in the liberal arts curriculum course content that gets automatically dismissed as either ridiculous, inappropriate or non-existent (for example, many aspects of women's history). Too, how do you obtain authorization and support to teach the practical skills that feminists say are essential?

Women's Studies programs must continually assess and balance their understanding of their students' needs with their perceptions of what is required to survive in the larger organization. Additionally, the implications is that on some level W.S. programs will be continuously accused of failing - by one side or the other - as they attempt to meet client needs, academic tradition and institutional norms and requirements.

One important alternative may be that W.S. programs and women's centers join forces. Since W.S. programs usually have to fight their survival battles in more traditional academic terms, it may be that women's centers can provide alternative educational programs - for credit or not - to cover some of the content areas that would be difficult for W.S. programs to support.

While it seems essential that Women's Studies programs continue to develop and expand, these implications suggest that it may be very difficult for the real needs of women to remain at the center of program planning as Women's Studies programs struggle to gain academic credibility and the resources such acceptance can bring.

TABLE I

Open-ended Responses Concerning Curriculum
College Level

RESPONSE LABEL	FREQUENCY
Unmet Needs	
Women in my field/women's studies	13
Intellectual stimulation	10
Practical skills/relevance to life	5
Physical education	4
Creative development	3
Independent study	3
Learning about sexism	2
Sex education	2
Political consciousness	2
Dissatisfactions	
No connection with one's life/real world	9
Limited physical education program	2
Lack of women's studies	2
Extreme competitiveness	2
Stifling of creativity	1
No political dimension to learning	1
No learning of practical value/skills	1
Helpful Aspects	
Women's studies	4
Skills learned	2
Reading	1
Flunking out	1
Taking male-oriented courses	1
Opportunity to study philosophy	1
Opportunity to study child development	1
Opportunity to go to law school	1
Opportunity to enter program of interest	1
Self-defense	1

TABLE II

Open-ended Responses Concerning Teacher Behaviors and Attitudes
College Level

RESPONSE LABEL	FREQUENCY
Unmet Needs	
Taking my work seriously	8
Encouragement/support for my abilities	5
Sex discrimination	3
Acceptance of my ideas as equally valid as males'	3
Treatment as an equal	1
Dissatisfactions	
Sex discrimination	9
Lack of encouragement for interests and abilities	8
Enforcement of female role	3
No female models	7
Middle class bias	1
Heterosexual bias	1
Helpful Aspects	
One or two teachers who cared for and encouraged me	15
Being accepted as an equal	6
Approval for my ability	3
Demands that I achieve	2
Minimum emphasis on sex	1
Assumption that I could be anything	1
Being considered an exception	1
Encouragement to enter a Ph.D. program	1

TABLE III

Open-ended Responses Concerning Identity and Self-Concept
College Level

RESPONSE LABEL	FREQUENCY
Unmet Needs	
Having women role models	10
Support for/development of new women's consciousness	5
Schizophrenia (reconciling role and reality)	4
Taking my life seriously	3
Reconciling being female with independence	3
Relationships with professors	3
Expressing my feelings	1
Self-confidence	1
Being strong as a woman	1
Interpersonal relationships	1
Female identification	1
Dissatisfactions	
Relationships with men	5
Social pressures	5
Not taking myself seriously	5
Self-limitations on what I did	4
Lacking self-confidence	3
Getting pregnant	2
Disregard for developing identity needs	2
Lack of social contacts	1
Being a woman	1
Seeing myself as an exception	1
Having to share the world with men	1
Helpful Aspects	
Other women who supported me	18
My own assertiveness/initiative	5
Being independent	5
Belief in myself	5
Women teacher role models	3
Friends	3
Blatant discrimination against women which forced strengthening responses	2
Being intellectually outstanding	2
Being a Lesbian/gay liberation	2
Being a feminist	2
Relationship with a professor	2
Developing skill in relating to others	2
Acceptance of my role	2
Using anger constructively	1
Insight into myself	1